

FILE ONLY

# America's passion to feel equal

We Americans are world-famous for our informality. We are the kind of nation where one president showed the world his surgical scar, another carried his own luggage and a third cracks bomb-the-Russian jokes over live mikes. I had forgotten why we prize informality so much, till three women lawyers from Africa reminded me.

The three African state attorneys noticed the informality right away in our courtrooms. Courts in their part of Africa follow the British system, with wigs, gowns, the whole formal rigamarole. Sitting in on trials over here in our courts, the women found it hard at first to tell the defense attorneys and prosecutors from the defendants.

## Equality no goal

In their courts, the defendant sits alone in a dock — not at a table cheek by jowl with his attorneys.

"In my country," said Ruth Masika of Uganda, "we're not aspiring to make everybody look equal. In America you are."

You bet we are. Why, we're such informal, equality-loving idealists, we'll take the scroungiest, meanest, low-down skunk, a leg-breaker, an orphanage-burner, a Bambi-killer, a capsule-tamperer, and we'll clean him up, shave him, blow dry his hair, put a \$300 suit on him, wrap a Calvin Klein tie around his neck that's never known a tie, and then whisk him into court trailing whiffs of after-shave, just so he can look respectably equal.

Masika was a little puzzled. Twenty years a lawyer, only the second woman to pass the bar in her country and now commissioner for Ugandan law reform, still she was puzzled why we go to so



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much trouble making the accused look like he's not accused — especially when our accused often is jailed before trial anyway and even brought to the courtroom in handcuffs. Their system, she said, is no different from ours in insisting the accused is equal before the law and innocent till proven guilty.

Masika and Henrietta Asare-Korang from Ghana and Mariam Denton from Gambia were on a month-long State Department tour of the United States and guests in Cincinnati of the International Visitors Center. They could see U.S. courtroom informality is due to our passion for equality. Heaven help the courtroom attorney or the politician who puts on airs and postures as if superior to the least little sandwich-fetcher among us. But how could I explain to these very bright women why we insisted on equality, even if sometimes we got only the illusion of equality?

How could I explain that equality (even the illusion of equality) doesn't make Americans feel equal? It makes us feel superior — that our system is superior. Masika and Denton later said that both Uganda and Gambia had abolished the jury system. Instead their judges are "advised" by citizen assessors who hold no verdict-making power.

Aha, I thought, feeling superior like a true-blue American. No jury of one's

peers? Unthinkable? I tried to forget one airhead juror I once served with and remember the other common-sensical ones. We solved our airhead-juror problem with American informality. We informally acted as if she never happened and delivered a verdict of guilty.

We Americans do talk a good game of equality, but what we ultimately want to feel is superior. Take all this informal summit hobnobbing with the Russians. It's supposed to stabilize us as super-power equals. If that were all we wanted, we'd be ninnies.

Another Cincinnati visitor this week, former Adm. and CIA Director Stansfield Turner was almost gloating over that Soviet nuclear sub that blew up and sank off Bermuda. Turner took the sunk sub as one more proof that "their technology isn't as good as ours." The United States and U.S.S.R. may have rough military equivalency in our combined 50,000 nuclear warheads, but U.S. strategists like Turner are counting on the informal, wide-open U.S. economic system whomping the daylights out of the Soviet economy by the year 2000. Turner said: "We should leave them in our dust."

Yes, we are informal, equality-loving good ol' boys, as long as we end up on top. Feeling superior. It's like the Israelis with their "secret" nuclear arsenal. If they do have the Great Equalizer, as reported, you can bet it's not just to feel equal to any Mideast threat. It is to feel whamdigously superior.

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